

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

The Active Character of Calvinism

R. C. CHALMERS

FEW people have so stamped their name upon the world as Calvin",¹ writes A. Mitchell Hunter, and in this opinion he is supported by a vast number of those best qualified to speak. Few would dispute his profound influence on Western civilization. His sway over the minds and hearts of men and nations arises from what has been called "the active character of Calvinism."² Calvin let loose not only spiritual forces which reformed the Church, but also moral power which transformed the world. "Calvin held an essentially activist view of human life. . . . He vigorously attacked the so-called contemplative life which had not only become an excuse for idleness, but cast a slur upon the ordinary life and work of men."³ Where, then, is the secret of "the active character of Calvinism" to be found?

I

The source of this activist view is the fact that he lived for the glory of God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. Calvin has a better right than Spinoza to be called "the God-intoxicated man." He believed that God the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer—and none other—is to be worshipped and served. God reigned supreme, and man's joy and freedom were to be found in accepting His sovereign dominion over all things. "The perfection of a happy life consists in the knowledge of God."⁴ Since man has been brought into existence by God his responsibility is to serve his Maker. This he does by living for God's glory, through faith, which is also God's gift. By faith man understands God's will for him and by faith also he is assured of the ultimate triumph of that will, so that he is able to stand in the evil day.

The God of the Bible, according to Calvin, is an active God. He is the living Lord who is ever at work renewing and restoring His creation. He is not the God of the *status quo*. He is the God of the end (*telos*). He does not rest in some quiet heaven, aloof from all that He has made. Rather, by the outreach of His active will, He is ever perfecting that which He has created. Accordingly, faith in such a Deity cannot be conceived in static terms. Faith in God is dynamic. It inspires and directs man to do God's will. If God is at work transforming the world, so must the believer be, in daily obedience to this active God Whom he serves.

Calvin was undoubtedly one of the world's great humanitarians. He showed his humanitarian spirit in his social leadership at Geneva. Some have described him as the father of the welfare state. But, however far we may go in paying tribute to the man and his influence, we must remember that Calvin's humanitarianism was not inspired, in the first instance, by a love of man but by obedience to God's will. "There can never be any human brotherhood apart from God", wrote Calvin. "Some may say, 'we

are all of the same country, we are all children of the same city'. This is the way they think to establish brotherhood. . . . by saying so, wicked men think to be cousins and brothers."⁵ No! It is not thus that humanitarianism is born and endures, according to Calvin. Brotherhood is not from below; it is from above. Its motivation is not horizontal but vertical. Believers are commanded to do good to all men because God's image is stamped on every man. "We must not reflect on the wickedness of men, but contemplate the divine image in them. This divine image, by its beauty, dignity, and glory, eclipses the faults of men, and allures us to embrace them in the arms of love."⁶ Calvinistic activism, therefore, in so far as it issues in humanitarianism, is motivated by the active will of God.

Man's whole life is regarded dynamically in Calvinism. Everything rests upon and is motivated by the "moving strength" of God. "We have to consider how we ought to glorify God in all our life, and hereby see also to what end we are created and why we live", wrote Calvin.⁷ Moreover, man has no independent life in the strict sense of the term, according to Calvin's teaching. The image of God in man is not a natural endowment but a spiritual gift, a reflection of the divine Word, which "is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). Only in the relationship of living faith can this image be maintained. It is thus by strenuous work, in obedience to God's will, that the image is truly reflected in man.

II

"The active character of Calvinism" is grounded not only in faith in an active God, but also in the biblical doctrine of election. Calvin believed that the Christian was elected by God to "lead a holy and blameless life. If the object of election be holiness of life, it should rather awaken and stimulate us to a cheerful practice of it, than be used as a pretext for slothfulness."⁸ Holiness is thus conceived in dynamic terms. The man of God must strive to make his election sure by acts of love.

This election, however, was not only to a holy and blameless life, but in the sovereign purpose of God to specific tasks. Why God chooses some individuals and peoples and not others is a mystery. But that He does elect, or select, certain people for special responsibilities is beyond doubt.

When a man believes that God has chosen him for some special work he has, in some degree, already won the victory. He can face obstacles knowing that he is an instrument in the hands of God. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31), cried St. Paul, in one of the best biblical passages on election. Calvinism, instead of leading to fatalism, as some might suppose, has "put salt and iron into human life. . . . It taught . . . a profound sense of the greatness of God, so that they who feared Him were little troubled with earthly fears."⁹

Involved, therefore, in the doctrine of election was Calvin's teaching about vocation or calling. God calls a man to labor for Him. "The Lord commands every one of us, in all the actions of life, to regard his vocation,"

writes Calvin. "Every individual's line of life . . . is, as it were, a post assigned him by the Lord, that he may not wander about in uncertainty all his days. . . . The magistrate will execute his office with greater pleasure, the father of a family will confine himself to his duty with more satisfaction, and all, in their respective spheres of life, will bear and surmount the inconveniences, cares, disappointments, and anxieties which befall them, when they shall be persuaded that every individual has his burden laid upon him by God. Hence also will arise peculiar consolation, since there will be no employment so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God."¹⁰

If, then, Christians are to live and work as "ever in their great Taskmaster's eye", idleness must be accounted a very grave sin. "From the Calvinistic point of view laziness is the most dangerous vice."¹¹ Laziness not only injures the soul's growth and turns a man into a social parasite; even more it is dishonoring to God. Slothfulness robs God of that which is His rightful due—the service of His creatures, made in His image. Calvinism teaches that labor is not optional; it is imperative. Man must work "while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work" (John 9:4).

Such a life demands self-denial. There is a holy asceticism that the Christian must practise. Such an asceticism does not require a man to forsake the world but to live in it as if he were not bound to it, except in service. This means that the Christian should seek not his own things "but those which are agreeable to the will of the Lord, and conducive to the promotion of His glory."¹² "All whom the Lord has chosen and honoured with admission into the society of saints, ought to prepare themselves for a life, hard, laborious and unquiet."¹³ Who is sufficient for this self-discipline? Only the man who has been called by God and lives in His grace.

The ethical consequences of living for God's glory are, therefore, very apparent in the life of the individual. They are even more striking in their social outreach.

Since God is the Lord of all life, every phase of society must be brought into captivity to Christ. Communal life must be ordered in a manner that will show forth His glory. A Christian civilization, a *corpus Christianum*, must be the social goal of the people of God. The State and all the concerns of man's common, everyday world must be brought into obedience to God. The State as well as the Church is "under God." The functions of the State are different from those of the Church, but both State and Church must respect the moral laws of God. Thus the position of the magistrate, teacher, ruler, or public officer, as well as the preacher, is to be held in high esteem. "The church should be the conscience of the state, the state the organ of an evangelized conscience. As a reminder of the spirit that should infuse all life, private and public, Calvin had the letters I H S carved or stamped on all public buildings, coins, and standards in Geneva."¹⁴

Furthermore, Calvinism declares that we must not make any sharp division between the realms of the secular and the sacred, since God is the Lord of both realms. The distinction between the secular and the sacred can remain, but there is no place in Calvin's teaching for an ethical dualism. The Christian is to serve God in the shop and the home as well as in the Church. Calvin himself devoted a large amount of time to secular affairs. Troeltsch tells us that Calvin "had a great deal to do with questions of industrial production. . . . It was at Calvin's instigation that, with the aid of the state loan, the manufacture of cloth and velvet was introduced into Geneva as a home industry, in order to give work to the poor and unemployed. Later on . . . the manufacture of watches was introduced with the same aim. . . . his letters, indeed, deal constantly with the interests of finance, trade, and industry."¹⁵

On this subject of vocation we must note that Calvinism has met with some criticism. Troeltsch and Tawney point out that there is an intimate relationship between Calvinism and the growth of Capitalism. Tawney declares that Calvinism "is perhaps the first systematic body of religious teaching which can be said to recognize and applaud the economic virtues",¹⁶ thus giving rise to a combination of religious zeal and practical shrewdness, which together with Calvin's "qualified indulgence to interest" or usury, smoothed the way for the rise of Capitalism. Max Weber goes even further and charges Calvinism with the main responsibility for fostering an unbridled *laissez-faire* Capitalism, and turning greed for gain into a virtue.¹⁷

Whatever truth there may be in these criticisms—and there is some—we must not overrate them. As Tawney points out,¹⁸ Weber over-simplifies the development of Capitalism in ascribing the main responsibility to Calvinism. There were other factors in sixteenth-century Europe—economic, political and technological—which even more than Calvinism abetted the rise of *laissez-faire* business enterprise. In fact, Capitalism had made considerable progress before Calvinism appeared on the scene.

Furthermore, Calvin did not foresee such an economic and social order as has arisen more recently in Western civilization, in which whole spheres of man's work and conduct have been divorced from religious sanctions; he is not to be held responsible for those developments which have come about through the entire disregard of the religious basis which to him was fundamental. Calvinistic discipline has no place for indulgence in luxuries or for the acquisition of wealth as a means to selfish personal power. A "vulgarized Calvinism" that has lost its sense of responsibility is not the Calvinism propounded by the prophet of Geneva.

Whatever weaknesses, therefore, we may discover in "the active character of Calvinism" and whatever questionable trends in society may be traced, in part, to Calvin's influence, we must not overlook the more positive and constructive aspects of his teaching. "Calvinism was an active and radical force", writes Tawney.¹⁹ "It was a creed which sought, not merely to purify

the individual, but to reconstruct church and state, and to renew society by penetrating every department of life, public as well as private, with the influence of religion." In spite of its faults Calvinism sought to carry out this task of purification, reconstruction and renewal with one aim in mind—the glory of God.

III

What does this "active character of Calvinism" imply for the Church in our time?

Because many of those who laid the foundations of national life in North America were the spiritual heirs of Geneva, this continent inherited a large share of the activist influence that stemmed from Calvinism. Unfortunately this spirit was deflected from spiritual to material ends under the commingled influences that went to form the culture of America, the pioneering, for example, which subdued the wilderness, and others which looked to man rather than God. (How the great defection took place is a subject into which we cannot here enter.) Thus we are faced now with an activism that has fallen from its high estate. It lacks spiritual motivation because it is not rooted in the divine. It lacks a transcendent purpose because it has no eternal goal. It has become a mere busyness, the activism of the extrovert that issues in superficial and trivial living.

No wonder, then, that Church life on this continent has been under a cloud of late, because of its involvement in this non-religious activism. There is no denying the substantial truth of much of the criticism directed against Church activism in recent years, especially that from abroad. Too often the life and work of our churches have been lacking in gospel motivation and purpose. W. L. Sperry writes that the religion of the average American Protestant is that of "doing good"; "more especially that sort of good that involves going about."²⁰

In penitence we must confess that Protestantism on this continent has often overlooked its first responsibility: to witness to the truth of God in Christ and the relevance of this truth for all of life. Such a witness is something other than giving a pietistic presentation of the latest political panacea for the world's ills. We have often lost sight of the truth, that if activity is to be effective for God's glory it must stem from strong theological convictions. Otherwise, such activity is aimless and fruitless.

However, we have often been too sweeping in the criticism of activism. We have allowed this proper condemnation of non-religious activism to become an adverse judgment upon all activism. Such a judgment is unwarranted and must yield place to a more positive and constructive appraisal of Church affairs, if our ecclesiastical life is to regain its sense of eternal direction and spiritual proportions.

Moreover, we believe that we are now entering upon a new era in religious faith on this continent, an era in which a stronger and more definite Christian note is being sounded from our pulpits, in Church councils, and

in the Church press. It is a note that reaches back to "the hid battlements of eternity" and points forward to man's true destiny under the hand of God. This new emphasis is not unmindful of the need for the Church's witness in the social and political arena. And this witness is now being made from the vantage-ground of faith in Christ and not from the standpoint of social utilitarianism. Its sanction is God's disclosure in His living Word. This return to biblical essentials is "the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes" (Mark 12:11). In other words, the theological renaissance of today is helping the Church to recover that religious motivation which was the mainspring of "the active character of Calvinism." One of the salutary lessons the Church can now learn from Calvinism is that its activism can be both socially oriented and evangelically inspired.

IV

The chief question is therefore how the Church, and especially its leaders, can assist in the cultivation of a more evangelical activism. The following suggestions are offered as a brief reply:

(1) *There needs to be a re-thinking of the Evangel*

To some extent the Church is engaged in this already, through that theological revival which is the concern of the clergy and many also of the laity. What is necessary is that all who are thus caught up in the theological ferment of our time should have a fresh appreciation of the treasures provided in the Holy Scriptures and in the writings of Christian scholars across the centuries. There are spiritual powers latent in the fellowship of the Church and these have to be made accessible and available, so that believers may fully understand what their message is and how it may be stated in the language of this age.

This age has seen the emergence of many ideologies, and one is confronted with a plethora of competing systems, some of them Christian heresies, some of them the complete denial of Christianity. How shall the believer or the serious enquirer sift the true grain from the chaff unless he has a vital biblical theology? Only as our activism finds its inspiration, support and direction in the Gospel will it be genuinely evangelical.

(2) *The Church must help people to see the relevance of the Evangel for all of life*

This is not an easy task. It involves giving people instruction about Christian witnessing in and through their vocations.

The term "the ministry of the laity" is commonly used today. It is a good phrase because it reminds us that the whole Church has a responsibility to God to declare His truth by word and life. And if the gospel is to be related to the problems of today it will ultimately be done by the laity who have learned to integrate worship and work, faith and life.

The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, meeting at Evanston in August, 1954, stated that "the time has come to make the min-

istry of the laity explicit, visible and active in the world. The real battles of faith today are being fought in factories, shops, offices and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in the press, radio and television, in the relationship of nations. Very often it is said that the church should 'go into these spheres'; but the fact is that the church is already in these spheres in the persons of its laity."²¹

But it is not enough to recognize that the Church is thus in these areas. For the laity must be trained to give a reason for the faith that is in them and be helped to make a distinctively Christian witness in their daily lives. It is not easy to say in every situation what the Christian attitude should be, how a Christian should behave, whether the faith implies one line of political action or another. Study of the Bible can assist Church members to make their decisions wisely, but it should be study within the fellowship of love and devotion. This will involve the right organization of groups for prayer, study and action. The thing that is dangerous is to let Christian faith become irrelevant to the life of modern man.

(3) *Preaching must become more kerygmatic and prophetic*

It must be first a proclamation of the mighty acts of God. At the same time preaching must declare God's will and announce God's call to men and nations. Such an announcement will sound the notes of both judgment and mercy, and make men realize the nature of this God with whom they have to do.

Calvin, in spite of his aristocratic leanings, had a great influence on the growth of democracy in Western culture. And one reason for this, we are told, is that he stirred up the masses by his preaching and thus helped to mould public opinion so that those who held political authority had to take cognizance of his persuasive powers. He declared to men that "righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34). It is not too much to expect the preachers of our time to do a similar work for God.

(4) *Church groups must be directed to see their work as a service for God*

This is a clubbing age. Its slogan is "the more we get together, the happier we will be." And our churches are not immune from this urge to get together for any purpose—good, bad or indifferent.

There is no need to disparage Church groups and organizations as such. We believe they have a ministry, under Christ, to perform. But as Church leaders we must make certain that they are fulfilling their task and that they have one single aim, above all lesser aims: to give Christ the pre-eminence. But in this, as in other matters, such direction will only be given to Church groups when those who are in positions of responsible leadership have strong convictions based upon the Evangel of God.

Finally, let it be remembered that human existence, according to the Gospel of God, is "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3) and has eternal dimensions. Such a life finds in the divine Christ an eschatological source

and a goal beyond the limits of space and time. From this faith alone will spring an activism that may be called evangelical. Its inspiration, its support and its direction are rooted and grounded in the eternal God. It is precisely because the Christian already participates in the unseen world by faith that he must strive by divine grace to order the life of the seen world in ways that are well-pleasing to Him who has called him "out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Pet. 2:9). "The life beyond this world is, in very deed, the inspiration of the life that now is."²²

NOTES

1. A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, revised ed., p. 1.
2. E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Vol. II, p. 577.
3. T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, p. 64.
4. *Institutes*, I. v. 1.
5. Quoted in Paul T. Fuhrmann, *God-Centred Religion*, p. 150.
6. *Institutes*, III. vii. 6.
7. Quoted in T. F. Torrance, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
8. *Institutes*, III. xxiii. 12.
9. John Buchan, *Montrose*, p. 47.
10. *Institutes*, III. x. 6.
11. Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 611.
12. *Institutes*, III. vii. 2.
13. *Institutes*, III. viii. 1.
14. Mitchell Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 300.
15. Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 642.
16. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, p. 106.
17. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, pp. 108 ff., 170 f., &c.
18. Tawney, *op. cit.*, pp. 89 f.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
20. W. L. Sperry, *Religion in America*, p. 135.
21. Report of the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches: section 6.
22. Troeltsch, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 1006.